

Imaginative Geographies in the Early Art Criticism of Eduardo Schiaffino

Laurens Dhaenens

Abstract

This paper examines the early art criticism of Argentinean artist and art critics Eduardo Schiaffino (1858 - 1935). Written in 1883 when the development of a national art was still in its incipient phase, these texts define and redefine the artistic significance of Argentina by positioning it in relation to Europe. Schiaffino described and compared European and Argentinean cultural landscapes and art practices without, however, having travelled to Europe. He thus imagined Europe in order to reinvent Argentina, an identity strategy that can be read as what Edward Said coined 'an imaginative geography'. This paper maps Schiaffino's 'imaginative geographies' and the kind of modernity they proposed.

Résumé

Le présent article analyse les premières critiques d'art d'Eduardo Schiaffino (1858-1935), un artiste et critique argentin. Rédigés en 1883, lorsque le développement d'un art national ne faisait que s'initier, ces textes définissent et repensent l'importance artistique de l'Argentine en la positionnant par rapport à l'Europe. Schiaffino décrit et compare les contextes culturels et les pratiques artistiques de l'Argentine et de l'Europe, sans toutefois avoir voyagé en Europe. Son Europe est une construction imaginaire qui lui sert à réinventer l'Argentine, une stratégie identitaire que l'on peut interpréter comme un exemple de ce qu'Edward Said a appelé la «géographie imaginaire». Le présent article donne un aperçu des géographies imaginaires de Schiaffino et du type de modernité qu'elles proposaient.

Keywords

Imaginative Geography, Argentina, Belle Epoque, national identity, Eduardo Schiaffino

Schiaffino's early art criticism¹

Eduardo Schiaffino (1858 - 1935) was a key figure in Argentine art history at the turn of the century. He was the cofounder of the *Sociedad de Estímulo de Bellas Artes* (1876) – the first independent association of artists in Argentina. Furthermore, he was founder and first director of the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* (1896) and director of important national and international exhibitions, including amongst others, the Argentine pavilion at the Saint Louise International Purchase Exhibition (1906) – the first exhibition of Argentine art abroad. Emerging early in his career, his art criticism practice appears as a means to

1. Part of this first part of the paper was presented at the conference *Las redes del arte: intercambios, procesos y trayectos en la circulación de las imágenes*, organised by CAIA, Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte from 23 until 26 of October 2013 in Buenos Aires. My lecture 'To Forget the Gondola for The Horse: The Imaginary Voyages of Schiaffino' was published in: Dolinko, Silvia, et. al., *Congreso Internacional de Teoría e Historia de las Artes, XV Jornadas CAIA: Las redes del arte: intercambios, procesos y trayectos en la circulación de las imágenes*, Buenos Aires: Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Artes, 2003.

defend and spread his ideas, educate the public, instigate public debates and write down the art history of Argentina.

Published between 24 April and 31 October 1883, his early art criticism consists of ten articles, which include (amongst others) polemics, critical reflections on art, monographic texts and an in-depth cultural analysis of Argentina that appeared in the form of seven successive articles.² Throughout this corpus of texts, Schiaffino defined and redefined the cultural identity of Argentina by positioning it dialectically in relation to Europe. Comparing, confronting and relating the artistic and cultural practices of both sides of the Atlantic, his discourse demonstrates his in-depth knowledge of European art and culture. Besides referring to numerous artists, ranging from Guido Reni, Rembrandt, Antoon van Dyck and Prosper Marilhat through to Gustave Doré, he discussed the art market, restoration practices, historical and contemporary art practices and cultural policies in Europe – all without having travelled to Europe.

Schiaffino's art criticism was informed by and embedded in the cosmopolitan reality of Buenos Aires that originated from the vast migrations streams from Europe.³ In his texts this migration reality and the cultural traffic it generated emerges as a context through which he *knew* and *imagined* Europe. For example, in his article on the Italian master José Aguyari, he described Venice from his master's perspective. Nevertheless, in his vivid account it is as if he walked the streets and visited the museums of the city of canals (Schiaffino 1883, 236). This indirect experience of Europe returns in his description of the atelier of Italian painter Ignacio Manzoni (1797-1888). However, there Schiaffino did not see Italian horizons but imitations of European masterworks (Zigzag 1883).⁴

Although Schiaffino rarely cited his exact sources, he mentioned numerous literary publications and art criticism, including the work of Alexandre Dumas, Théophile Gautier, Victor Hugo, Edgar Allen Poe, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Alighieri Dante, Miguel de Cervantes, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift and the guides from the German publishing house Baedeker. The importance of Gautier in particular stands out. Schiaffino repeatedly quoted the French author to support his statements (Pincel 1883a; Zigzag 1883a). Furthermore, we know Schiaffino had access to prestigious European magazines and newspapers at the library of the *Sociedad de Estímulo de Bellas Artes*. Though there is no library index available today, art historian Manzi who studied the archives before they were destroyed indicated it had subscriptions to *L'Artiste*, *L'Art*, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, *Le Monde Illustrée*, *L'Art Moderne*, *La Nature*, *La Ilustración Española*, *La Ilustración Italiana*, *Galerie Contemporaine* and *La Revue des Deux Mondes* (Manzi n.d., 3 and 17).

Via the works and words of others schiaffino thus *knew* Europe before *experiencing* Europe. However, this knowledge was more textual than visual. Laura Malosetti Costa described in her book

2. Schiaffino published these texts under the pseudonyms Zigzag and Pincel and the acronym EJS. These texts can be found in the Schiaffino Archive that is stored at the *Archivo General de la Nación* in Buenos Aires. These early texts are in the folder 3342 Impresos 1895–1935.

3. In the nineteenth century, Argentina experienced huge immigration from Europe. This movement reached its height between 1881 and 1914 when more than 4.200.000 persons arrived in Buenos Aires (Devoto 2009, 13-16, 247-248)

4. The image of Manzoni's studio will be further elaborated in the pages below.

Cuadros de Viaje how in 1880 there were almost no possibilities to see art works in Buenos Aires. There were no museums or galleries. Furthermore, the circulation of reproductions in the local press was still nonexistent. The only public places exhibiting art were a few shops in Avenida Florida but even there it was limited to small scale exposition in shop windows. Yet, as Malosetti Costa accentuates, if the public did not *see* art works or exhibitions, they did *know* them through the elaborate descriptions published in local magazines and newspapers (Malosetti Costa 2008, 13-14). José Emilio Burucúa and Ana María Telesca called this hiatus between the written word and the image “the hallmark of Argentine culture at the end of the nineteenth century” (Telesca and Burucúa 1992, 73).

In order to *see* European masterworks, Schiaffino was dependent on the importation of illustrated magazines, books and albums. His comments on the work of Fortuny in his article *Galimatías crítico-artístico* clearly illustrate this: “We know almost the complete oeuvre of Fortuny, we just finished leafing through the photograph album that contains his principle works” (Zigzag 1883b). However, the impact of reproductions is rarely visible in Schiaffino’s texts. He wrote about the work of Rembrandt, van Dyck, Goya, Marilhat or Constant with the same familiarity as when he discussed the work of fellow artists such as José Aguyari (1843-1885) or José Miguel Pallejá (1861-1887). The only noticeable difference is the absence of descriptions of European art works. Schiaffino depicted the artists’ style or subject matter without entering into detail.

Hence, Schiaffino’s early art critical practice was an activity of reading, discussing and translating and not so much of viewing and judging. The image does not occupy a central place in his texts, except in two articles that focus on expositions at Casa Bossi in Avenida Florida (E.J.S. 1883; Pincel 1883a). The art critic directed himself to describing and comparing cultural landscapes, searching for the source of a national and modern art. He displaced himself symbolically to Europe, to gaze back at his native country and to redefine it as a future artistic centre.

This practice of reading, translating and imagining was referred to by Edward Said as the constitution of “an imaginative geography”. Introduced in his seminal study *Orientalism* (1978), the concept of imaginative geography refers, in general terms, to the spatial dimensions of the cultural practice of identity formation. It denotes the activity of representing spaces, places and landscapes to identify and position one’s own cultural territory (49-73). Examining Schiaffino’s representations of Europe and Argentina, this paper maps his imaginary geographies and the kind of modernity they proposed. With the focus on three texts in which the relationship with Europe stands out, it investigates the repositioning of Argentina from a barbaric hinterland to a new Orient.

From the barbaric to the exotic

In one of his first art critical texts, *A propósito del arte* (About Art) published on 17 May 1883 in *El Diario*, Schiaffino focused on the honourable distinction that Argentine artists Eduardo Sívori (1847-1918) and Alfredo Paris (1849-1908) received in Paris for their participation in the drawing contest of the French magazine *Le Fusain*. Praising their work as examples of the artistic progress in the region of Rio de la Plata, Schiaffino encouraged both artists to continue to hold high “the flag of our National Art” at a point when the project of establishing a national art was still in its incipient phase. Despite

the establishment of the *Sociedad de Estímulo de Bellas Artes* in 1876, Buenos Aires had not become a generous environment for artists. In the article, he emphasized how Sívori and Paris finished their studies in a country “that lacks the elements for successful and rapid completion of an artistic career”. For Schiaffino, both Paris’ and Sívori’s success abroad was not because of the facilities present in Buenos Aires but because of the cultural value of the local landscape (Pincel 1883b).

Since Schiaffino did not know the award-winning work of Alfredo Paris, he only elaborated on the drawing of Sívori that represented a peasant carrying a bundle of firewood in an open field in the Forest of Palermo. He did not describe this drawing, but rather, *remembered* it. He recalled its exposition at Casa Bossi in 1882 and a description in *El Diario*, concluding: “We remember it was done with eternal frankness of execution and that the landscape had all the *cachet* of the country” (Pincel 1883b). Rather than an art work, the drawing emerges in the text as a place to reflect upon the cultural significance of this landscape, in the sense that it provided Schiaffino with a particular perspective. The Palermo of Sívori was not the upper class Palermo characterized by rigorous planning. On the contrary, it was the last remaining area of wild nature surrounding Buenos Aires. He coined it ‘the Argentine Fontainebleau’.

Recollecting Sívori’s landscape, Schiaffino revisited the forest and revealed a conflict between the rapid urbanization of the city and the natural environment. For the author, the expansion of the capital had transformed the countryside into “a desolate landscape in which one sees more telegraph poles than trees”. Amidst this landscape, the forest was “an oasis”. He illustrated the situation with an anecdote, accentuating the impact of urbanization on the surroundings of Buenos Aires, together with the interdependent relationship between art and nature that it engendered:

A friend told us how one morning, when he was copying a tree trunk that figured in the foreground of his landscape, soon a Galician porter arrived who, without asking permission, gave it a strong push to uproot it, making it creak; our friend jumped up as if moved by a spring ready to defend affectionately his foreground: the destroyer had to comply with the prohibition and withdraw, with his ears hanging down, ending thus a struggle, that was, on a small scale, the one between civilization and barbarism (Pincel 1883b).⁵

Representing a tree as a protagonist of a painting, Schiaffino staged pristine nature as a vital source of inspiration for art. The artist appears as the defender of “the barbaric”. However, his image of the city renders the dichotomy ‘civilization - barbarism’ ambiguous. Schiaffino did not present Buenos Aires as a civilized society. From his point of view, the city had caused “a slaughter of trees”, generating “a sick nature”. The capital was destroying the source for a national imagery and could not offer any conditions for artists, obliging them to travel and study in Europe. As such, the text throws into relief an image of Buenos Aires as a wild growing body, devoid of cultural sensitivity, that can be categorized as barbaric.

5. As these texts have never been translated to English, all translations are by the author of this paper. I choose to include only the original texts of the long quotations. “*Nos contaba un amigo que, estando en Palermo una mañana copiando un tronco de árbol que figuraba en el primer plano de su paisaje, no tardó en llegar un gallego changador, quien, sin pedir permiso, dióle un fuerte empujón para desarraigarlo, haciendo crujir; nuestro amigo se levantó como movido por un resorte dispuesto a defender caramente su primer plano; el demoledor tuvo que acatar la prohibición y retirarse con las orejas gachas, terminando así una lucha, que era, en pequeño, la de la civilización contra la barbarie.*”

‘Civilization’ and ‘barbarism’ are recurrent concepts in the discourse on art at the end of the nineteenth century. In general, the terms refer to the evolution from a reality of caudilismo and civil wars, of which the iconic image was rural life on the pampas, towards a modern urbanized and industrialized nation. As Laura Malosetti Costa remarked, from the 1890s on, the struggle between ‘barbarism’ and ‘civilization’ was often strategically redefined in order to emphasize the importance of traditional and spiritual values and to counterbalance the focus on mercantile and materialist culture (Malosetti Costa 2001, 52-55). In Schiaffino’s text, tradition is linked with the landscape. However, it does not concern the endless plains of the pampas but the wild forest of Palermo, an apolitical territory that historically and iconographically stood detached from Argentina’s “barbaric” past. From an artistic view, it was ‘a Fontainebleau’, making Paris, “the centre of civilization”, the model to follow for the Argentinean capital.

Schiaffino again tackled the subject of the landscape and a national art in his text on Venetian painter José Aguyari (1843-1885) that was published on 20 July 1883 in the magazine *La Ilustración Argentina*.⁶ Through a description of the life and work of the Italian artist who was also his master, he demonstrated the cultural value of the Argentine countryside. He thereby concentrated on a specific moment in Aguyari’s career when the painter wanted to leave Argentina but decided to stay after a sojourn in the countryside of Rio Paraná. Appropriating the foreigner’s experience, Schiaffino did not limit himself to the significance of the natural landscape as he did in his previous text but pointed as well to the traditional way of life this landscape implied. The text thus signified a shift in focus from nature to vernacular culture; from the forest of Palermo to “the ignored spectacle of the majestic pampas, the colourful clothes of its inhabitants and the most picturesque of all its traditions”(Schiaffino 1883, 236).

Aguyari emerges in this article as a personification of Venice. Schiaffino described him as “a son of Venice” and a colourist who “leaving his city, carried in his eyes the blue *nuance* of the Venetian sky” (236). Hence portraying his master, he also portrayed the city:

“Son of the fantastic Venice, the most poetic of the cities, lulled by the whispering glide of the gondolas and the monotonous chant of the drivers crossing its fluid streets; grown, amidst ancient stately palaces that testify to the great past of the Serenissima Republic, and in whose thick walls one believes it possible still to feel the furtive steps of the henchmen, in the service of the fearsome Council of Ten; preserving the memory of the white doves that perch unwarily on the stones of San Marcos, which were the object of his admiration as a child; full of memories of the immortal art works of Carpaccio, Titian, Barberelli, Tintoreto, etc. that populate the Museum and the palaces of his missed Venice [...]” (236).⁷

Besides depicting the rich cultural background of Aguyari, Schiaffino articulated with this vivid representation a critique on Buenos Aires. It summoned what the painter was missing in the Argentine

6. The text was republished in the newspaper *El Nacional* on 7 September 1883.

7. "Hijo [Aguyari] de la fantástica Venecia, la más poética de las ciudades mecido por el murmurante resbalar de las góndolas y el canto monótono de los conductores, al cruzar sus líquidas calles; crecido, en medio de los antiguos palacios señoriales que atestiguan la pasada grandeza de la Serenísima República, y en cuyos anchos muros créese sentir aún el furtivo paso de los esbirros, al servicio del temible Consejo de los Diez; conservando el recuerdo de las blancas palomas que se abaten confiadas en las losas de San Marcos, y que eran objeto de su admiración de niño: llena la memoria con las obras inmortales de Carpaccio, el Tiziano, Barberelli, Tintoreto, etc. que pueblan el Museo y los palacios de su estrañada [sic.] Venecia, [...]."

capital, thus pointing to the difference and distance between the two cities. Representing the cultural wealth of Venice, he conveyed the absence of traditions, history, museums and art works in Buenos Aires. Yet, if he located Buenos Aires far from Venice, he juxtaposed the countryside to it. According to Schiaffino, it was in the countryside that Aguyari discovered what he did not find in Buenos Aires: "The painter forgot the gondola for the horse, the Gran Canal for the Parana River, the palaces of stones in whose facades he had studied the degradation of colours, for the rickety hut of mud walls and a straw roof gilded by the sun" (236).

By associating picturesque characteristics of Venice with elements of the Argentine countryside, Schiaffino projected a romantic image onto the local landscape, transforming it into "a fantastic America, very similar to the silent Venice" (Schiaffino 1883, 236). This implies a translation of the attraction of the remote into "the lure of the local", to borrow a phrase from Lucy Lippard.⁸ Schiaffino's projection proposes the vernacular as being as artistically interesting as the much painted city of canals. However, approaching the pampas through the eyes of a Venetian painter, Schiaffino reduced it to its aesthetics, depicting it as an exotic place. As such, neither he nor Aguyari identified themselves with it. Schiaffino does not refer to any history of the pampas. Rather than a place in history, it was the locality of Argentina viewed from a European perspective. It was a landscape that set Argentina apart; an image waiting to be painted.

The distance between Argentina and Europe that Schiaffino wrote about in these two early texts was not an unequivocal critique. The peripheral position appears to be an advantage and disadvantage at the same time; a duality that translated itself into the recognition of the countryside and vernacular culture as an exceptional source for a national art and the rejection of the capital as a cultural wasteland. In his following text, Schiaffino elaborated upon the conflicting situation of his native country, widening his scope. Continuing his plea for a national art in Argentina, he defined Argentina no longer as a new Venice for Argentine artists but as a new Orient for Europe.

A New Orient

From 18 September to 1 October 1883, Schiaffino published under the pseudonym *Zigzag* a series of articles in *El Diario* that together form the essay *Apuntes sobre el arte en Buenos Aires. Falta de protección para su desenvolvimiento*.⁹ A seminal text in the historiography of Argentina, the *Apuntes* is an in-depth analysis of the cultural condition of Argentina and of Buenos Aires in particular. It deals with

8. Lippard coins this concept, exploring historical narratives written in places by people who live or lived in those places. In this context she defines the lure of the local as "the pull of place that operates on all of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere" (Lippard 1997, 7). In the case of Schiaffino, the lure of the local was the geographical component of a modernist project that sought to define the nation's cultural identity.

9. A complete version of the article can be found in the Schiaffino archive at the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Buenos Aires* and at the aforementioned *Archivo General de la Nación* (SA AGN). I refer to the copy preserved at the *Archivo General de la Nación*. Schiaffino collected this article in a notebook that he titled *E.J.S. Traducciones y artículos, Buenos Aires 83-84*. This notebook is archived the folder 3342 Impresos 1895-1935. My page references correspond to the pages of this book and not the article that has no pages. In the text, I refer to the essay as the *Apuntes*.

the art criticism, public opinion, cultural policies, urban development, architecture, interior decoration, art market, restoration practices and includes the first historiography of art in Argentina. The perspective of this essay alternates between a micro and a macro level: from studying the taste of the citizens to positioning Argentina in art history. Throughout this text, Schiaffino continued his discourse about the failings of the capital and the significance of nature and vernacular culture. Nevertheless, he drew a more elaborate map: one that explicated the changes necessary for Buenos Aires and redefined the cultural territory of Argentina and its relation with Europe.

Schiaffino opened his essay, portraying Buenos Aires as a city in transformation. He described the expansion of paved streets, the destruction of old houses, the construction of avenues and the rise of modern buildings, city gardens and monuments. This rapid progress gave the capital the name of “a modern Athens”. However, this was not as he saw the city but how, according to him, the city was seen by a specific group formed by recently arrived foreigners, by inhabitants who had lived in the city for a couple of years and by those who had never left it, except to travel to Montevideo (43). Underlining their relation with the capital, he implicitly criticized their lack of critical distance: foreigners and recent inhabitants could not see beyond the commercial prosperity of Buenos Aires and the latter, never having left the country, did not have any point of comparison. For Schiaffino, the capital was not “a modern Athens”. On the contrary, it was “a body without a soul” (43). Emphasizing the absence of artistic practices and cultural institutions, he described the urban metamorphosis as purely material. It was creating a nation without an identity, unaware of its history and its Latin heritage and fixed in a rudderless acceleration.

Schiaffino distanced himself from this Buenos Aires. He was not a citizen of this modern Athens as “the inhabitants of modern Athens ignore that which is aesthetics” (44). In the first parts of the essay he revisited the city, demonstrating how the ignorance towards aesthetics manifested itself on every level of society. Entering the city palaces, he observed the interior decorations and criticized how gold foil replaced decorative paintings, ornaments overcrowded tympanums and ceilings, and Ionic and Corinthian capitals were repeated *ad infinitum*. His judgment was clear: “if there is no taste, bad taste reigns everywhere” (45). He repeated the same critique visiting public squares, gardens and parks: “Here taste and finesse are lacking” (46). Schiaffino did not see any value in the rational urban planning that the capital implemented. For him, the uniform squares, the rigidly-designed gardens and the artificial wildernesses were an expression of the city’s fixation on economic progress. Trees in Buenos Aires were nothing more than “parasols and firewood” and “a source of income” (47). The only exception in this economized landscape was the Forest of Palermo. There, wild nature had triumphed over city gardening.

Schiaffino devoted a large part of the essay to writing the first historiography of art practices in Argentina since 1827. Embedded in the discourse of his *Apuntes*, it elaborated his critique. Schiaffino reviewed the cultural significance of his country through the biographies of painters and sculptors who had lived and/or worked in Argentina. Studying their lives and works, he presented a history of international travel and exchange whereby Argentina appears as a transitory destination. The lack of interest of the government

and the public together with the absence of a museum, an academy and government protection obliged national artists to study at the renowned academies of Europe and impeded foreign artists to develop an art practice. As such, he displays how Buenos Aires was capable of hosting artists, but unable to produce or keep them.

In his entry on the Italian painter Ignacio Manzoni (1797-1888), Schiaffino presented an image of the condition of cultural isolation which Buenos Aires imposed. Observing the many voyages to Europe of the Italian painter, he pointed to the artistic restlessness that the city generated amongst artists. As with Aguyari's impulse to leave Argentina, Manzoni's travels were an effect of the cultural poverty of the city. Schiaffino saw this also expressed in the artist's experience of his studio as a mediating mirror reflecting masterworks from all European museums: "Manzoni found in his own work a reflection of all the museums of Europe; locked up in his studio and with a bit of good will, he could believe he was surrounded by the representatives of painting; while he lacked the of original Spanish and Flemish [art works], he was consulting his own imitations" (54).

The migratory effect of artists also applied to art works. Writing about the French artist, Alphonse León Noel (1807-1884), and Irish artist, Enrique Sheridan (1838-1863), Schiaffino deplored how certain pieces of their art works depicting historical topics and national traditions had left the country. The cause of this loss was the negligence of government and the public (55-56). In the case of Noel, he fiercely criticized the situation in Argentina by referring in an ironic tone to European practices:

As for his great cuadros de costumbres, it has been impossible to see them, we are told that they have migrated to Europe, where unfortunately for us there appear to be people who appreciate them. It is a rumour like any other, that we Argentineans should not heed, because it is not really proven that in the Old World there may be persons so impractical as to waste their time collecting good paintings (56).¹⁰

This fierce critique is throughout the essay countered by a positivistic image that represents Argentina as a culturally privileged country. As Malosetti Costa has showed, Schiaffino translated Hippolyte Taine's famous dictum *race-milieu-moment* into his local context, projecting a bright future. He demonstrated how the Argentine land was a "land of promise, in which everything sprouts and produces abundantly" and how the Argentineans were "the Latin race", "ready for all intellectual conquests" (Malosetti Costa 1999, 16-17; Zigzag 1883a, 43 en 59). Argentina was predestined to become a new centre in a shifting geo-history of art:

Italy had artistic dominance when the church was the true government; Spain could rival her for the same reason; today, France, taking official protection as far as it is physically possible, has generated a modern art, a powerful rival to the ancient, that gives it artistic supremacy in the world. The twin arts have flourished around painting and sculpture, thus offering a unique spectacle of a core of poets, writers and musicians, more numerous than in any part of the world.

10. "En cuanto a sus grandes cuadros de costumbres, nos ha sido imposible verlos, nos dicen que han emigrado a Europa, donde por desgracia para nosotros parece que existe gente que los aprecia. Es un rumor como otro cualquiera, del que los argentinos no deberíamos hacernos eco, pues no está muy probado que en el viejo mundo puedan haber personas tan poco prácticas, como para perder tiempo en conservar buenos cuadros."

England is satisfied – rightly – with market dominance; Germany has scientific dominance and we Argentineans – with a course set by Italy, Spain and France – we should aspire to nothing but the cultivation of the arts and instead we only occupy ourselves with commerce.

It is time we try to foster art, certainly because we possess a colourist environment, traditional customs to be perpetuated and national costumes of the most picturesque sort (Zigzag 1883a, 60).¹¹

The author supported his evolutionary thesis with his historiography. Starting with Carlos Enrique Pellegrini, a French painter and architect who came to Buenos Aires to work for the Rivadavia government, and ending with Argentine painters who were studying at the great academies of Europe at the time, he mapped the incipient art practices of national and international artists in Argentina between 1827 and 1883 from which a national art could arise. His canon of artists and art works thus preceded and anticipated a national art. It demonstrated the germs from which it could grow. As such, he referred to a national art in terms of “nascent”, “this coveted future” and “what one day will be a national art”, situating it in a latent state: it was a potential but not yet evident or realized. Hence, Schiaffino’s historiography oscillates between being a historical account of art in Argentina and a description of Argentinean art.

In spite of this claim of pre-destination, the text also includes clear demands for the government. Directing himself to the state, Schiaffino argued for protection of the arts that went further than giving study grants for Europe. The state should commission artists to construct monuments, decorate public buildings, depict historical events and portray meritorious persons. In addition, he demanded the free importation of art works or a reduction in import taxes and the foundation of a public gallery and official protection for national artists and foreign artists who were based in Buenos Aires (43-44, 60). He thus argued for the integration of artists into society, the institutionalization of art following a European model and the bridging of the distance with Europe by facilitating cultural traffic.

As with his previous articles, the key to the establishment of a national art was Argentina’s landscape and vernacular culture. However, in the *Apuntes* Schiaffino explained this “colourist environment” by placing the picturesque characteristics of Argentina on the same level as those of the Orient without explicitly comparing both cultures. Instead of demonstrating cultural resemblances and differences, he envisioned how Argentina could occupy a similar place and role as the Orient in answering the exotic gaze of the West. “European painters”, he wrote, “after exploiting all the aspects of the various scenes of the artistic Venice, directed their gaze to the East in the search for light, colour and primitive

11. *"Italia, tuvo el predominio artístico cuando la Iglesia era el verdadero gobierno; España pudo rivalizar con ella, debido a la misma causa; hoy en día la Francia llevando la protección oficial hasta donde es materialmente posible, ha engendrado un arte moderno, poderoso rival del antiguo, que le da la supremacía artística en el mundo. Las artes gemelas han florecido en torno a la pintura y la escultura, y ofrece así el espectáculo único, de un núcleo de poetas, de literatos y de músicos, más numeroso que en parte alguna de la tierra. Inglaterra se contenta - y hace bien - con el predominio comercial, Alemania tiene el científico y nosotros los argentinos - con un rumbo marcado por Italia, España y Francia- que no debemos aspirar sino al cultivo de las artes, nos ocupamos en cambio puramente, de comercio. Es tiempo de que tratemos de fomentar el arte, tanto más, que poseemos un clima colorista, costumbres tradicionales a perpetuarse, y trajes nacionales de los más pintorescos."*

traditions, new topics” (60). Looking beyond the plains of the pampas, he encountered similar elements in Argentina. He pointed to the jungle of Tucuman, the mountains of San Luis and Mendoza, the wild Southern coasts of Patagonia and the “grand landscapes of Nahuel Huapi, whose sublimity, according to the explorer Moreno, fully satisfies the trouble of the journeys”. Furthermore, he mentioned the gaucho and *la china* as popular pictorial figures and numerous animals populating the landscapes “who only await their Rosa Bonheur” (60).

At that point in time, Schiaffino had not visited most parts of the Argentine landscapes he summoned. Discovered in 1876, the landscapes of Nahuel Huapi were still remote territories (Moreno 1883, 145). The same applies for the coasts of Patagonia. Moreover, there are no accounts of him travelling with his family to the mountains of Mendoza or the jungle of Tucuman. Schiaffino’s redefinition of Argentina’s cultural territory corresponded with the then geopolitical situation of the country that was mainly marked by explorative expeditions, the campaign of the dessert of 1879 and the campaigns of the Andes of 1881-1883. His essay rephrases the political issues of territorial expansion and nation building but from a cultural perspective, emphasizing questions of identity.

Schiaffino proposed an intellectual conquest of the Argentine landscape with European Orientalism as a model. Describing how Marilhat, Decamps, Regnault and Fortuny introduced “the torrid blood of the Orientals” in “civilized painting” and “filled salons and museums with exotic landscapes bathing in the sun [...]” (60), he defined this process of exploring, discovering and depicting as an essential phase in the development of the nation. Schiaffino did not want to transform the landscape but rather to appropriate it in the construction of a national imagery because it would not just create “a new genre of painting, called the National Art” (60), it would also position Argentina as a new international artistic centre.

Concluding remark

Connecting Buenos Aires with Paris and the landscape with the Forest of Fontainebleau, Venice and ‘the Orient’, Schiaffino’s imaginative geographies reveal his ongoing search for a modernity that he wanted to translate to Argentina. However, his texts do not present a clear image of his endeavoured modernity. They convey above all a continuous struggle with the expanding city, the disappearing countryside, the presence of a large, diverse and unknown landscape and unstable territorial politics. His cultural maps rejected the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of the countryside without, however, idealising past times. Schiaffino’s eyes were set on the future. “Art”, he wrote, “was the last word in the civilisation of a people; therefore it complements the material progress of nations” (Zigzag 1883a, 43). The main argument of all his articles was the necessity to develop an artistic scene through a cultural process that implied the cultural appropriation of national territory; the preservation of the local landscape; the institutionalisation of art; and a fluid artistic exchange with Europe. Thus, however flexible his basic concepts were at that time, the kind of modernity he envisioned was marked by authenticity, tradition, and intellectual progress. It was a modernity that he expected would bring a genuine national imagery, validate traditional ways of life, educate the public and position the country as a new centre in a modern geocultural constellation.

Bibliography

- Devoto, Fernando. 2009. *Historia de La Inmigración En La Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana.
- E.J.S. 1883. "La Semana Artística. Una Testa de Santoro." *El Diario*, April 24.
- "Francisco P. Moreno." 1883. *La Ilustración Argentina*, May.
- Lippard, Lucy R. 1997. *The Lure of the Local. Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: The New Press.
- Malosetti Costa, Laura. 1999. "Eduardo Schiaffino: La Modernidad Como Proyecto." (Seminar: Los Estudios de Arte Desde América Latina: Temas y Problemas. Organised by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in 1999).
- . 2001. *Los Primeros Modernos. Arte y Sociedad En Buenos Aires a Fines Del Siglo XIX*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- . 2008. *Cuadros de Viaje: Artistas Argentinos En Europa y Estados Unidos (1880 - 1910)*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Manzi, Ofelia. *Sociedad de Estímulo de Bellas Artes. Desde Su Fundación Hasta La Nacionalización de La Academia*. Buenos Aires: Atenas.
- Pincel. 1883a. "El Pintor Pallejá. Una Exhibición Artística." *El Diario*, June 15.
- . 1883b. "A Propósito Del Arte." *El Diario*, June 17.
- Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. 2003rd ed. London: Pinguin.
- Schiaffino, Eduardo. 1883. "José Aguyari." *La Ilustración Argentina* (20): 236.
- Telesca, Ana María, and José Emilio Burucúa. 1992. "Schiaffino, Corresponsal de El Diario En Europa (1884-. 1885). La Lucha Por La Modernidad En La Palabra y En La Imagen." *Anales Del Instituto de Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas "Mario J. Buschiazso" 1989 - 1991* 27-28.
- Zigzag. 1883a. "Apuntes Sobre El Arte En Buenos Aires. Falta de Protección Para Su Desenvolvimiento." *El Diario*.
- . 1883b. "Galimatías Critico-Artístico." *El Diario*, October 8.

Laurens Dhaenens is preparing a PhD at KU Leuven, in collaboration with the Universidad Nacional de San Martin. His research project focuses on the artistic relations between Argentina and Europe during the Belle Époque.

Email: Laurens.dhaenens@arts.kuleuven.be